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News

Downstaters grow no-nicotine tobacco Farmers raising gene-modified plant

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CARMI, Ill.--A handful of farmers in Southern Illinois are trying their hands at raising a new cash crop--genetically engineered tobacco that its maker says could help people stop smoking.

Almost no one here can remember when southeastern Illinois was a major producer of tobacco, but a North Carolina cigarette maker is hoping farmers here will replace some of their corn and soybean fields with no-nicotine tobacco.

The tobacco was genetically engineered by scientists at Vector Tobacco, a sister company to Liggett Group Ltd., the tobacco company that broke ranks with the industry by being the first to admit that nicotine was addictive.

Vector scientists say their new Omni Free cigarettes made with the new tobacco taste like regular cigarettes but contain fewer carcinogens and may help smokers kick the habit.

The product has its critics. Some say the tobacco isn't any safer than traditional cigarettes. And other big tobacco companies are worried that the genetically engineered plants could interfere with their foreign cigarette sales.

Farmers here working with Vector officials say they don't care whether the crop is genetically engineered or not. They just want to know if tobacco is a good alternative to more conventional crops such as corn and soybeans.

"It's a learning year for all of us. We're still trying to learn the soil, learn the climate, learn the people," said Bill Maksymowicz, an agronomist for Vector.

Earl Short, 64, is one of the farmers who welcomes the tobacco. He said he had tried just about everything to turn a profit. He raises

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